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Cultural Theory and SHU Study Abroad in India

Sacred Heart University's recent study abroad trip to India allowed students to gather information on cultural representation, communication, and understanding that can give way to insight on a vast range of global affairs. The meaning of the intercultural exchanges experienced by Sacred Heart University (SHU) and Pandit Deendayal Petroleum University (PDPU) students can be solidified through an analyzing of cultural studies and I-O Psychology. Specifically, this paper will take a close look at the cultural theory of Stuart Hall (who essentially developed cultural studies) as well as the Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI) utilized by SHU students to both brief and debrief the trip. Through an understanding of the language, cultural differences, and social issues encountered by SHU and PDPU students, we can experience an understanding of cultural differences in communication – specifically in the context of American and Indian culture.

A conversation involving these intercultural communications can best begin with an understanding of cultural studies itself – and a name that commonly comes with such a discussion: Stuart Hall. Cultural studies entail an education on what culture is, how it affects the day-to-day life of people all across the globe, and how it is perceived. Stuart Hall specifically has contributed numerous models and theories for the breakdown of cultural studies, and the most famous of his includes the encoding/decoding model of television discourse. A large portion of Hall's studies incorporated media representation

due to the argument that cultural understanding and representation in TV, film, advertisements, etc. go hand in hand. Although I will not be assessing his work in a media-related lens here, we will find that his theory works well for an understanding of in-person relations as well.

In his 1997 article “The Work of Representation,” Hall takes his extensive knowledge on the subject and uses it to break cultural representation down to its bare bones. Hall begins this complex discussion by providing a couple of varied, plain-text definitions of the term “representation...”:

“Representation means using language to say something meaningful about, or to represent, the world meaningfully, to other people” (Hall 15).

“Representation is the production of meaning through language” (Hall 16).

With these definitions under our belts, Hall follows with a layout of various approaches to cultural representation. He breaks cultural representation up into three categories of theory: reflective, intentional, and constructionist. Reflective representation argues that language is a reflection of the truth; the meaning already exists, and the words on a page are merely conveying that meaning. Intentional representation, on the other hand, is a depiction that is purposely produced by its creator to convey a specific message or belief. Rather than mirroring what already exists, intentional representation argues that language is used to create meaning. The third category of cultural representation – in comparison to the reflective and intentional approaches – carries a bit more of a substantive discussion. Constructionist representation, Hall maintains, involves an

understanding of semiotics. Essentially, semiotics is the recognition that there is a difference between real concepts and the words and images that we use to describe them. The real concepts are referred to as the “signified,” and the words and images used for description are referred to as the “signifiers.” A semiotic approach to cultural representation, therefore, relies heavily on the use and comprehension of language.

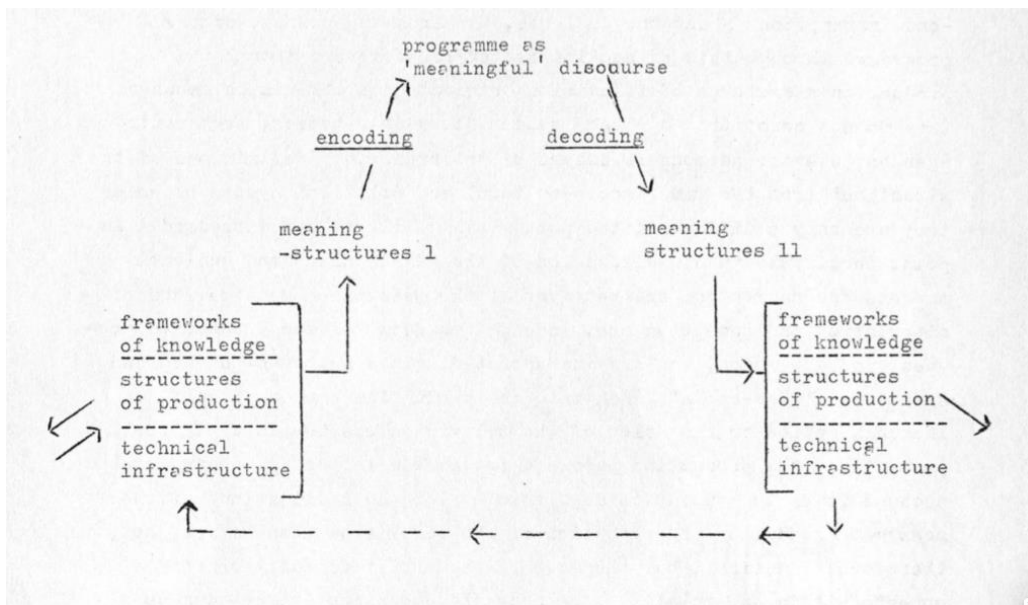
Part of understanding semiotics involves the details of a concept called “polysemy.” This concept argues that a signifier can have more than one meaning; that is, different people can potentially interpret signs differently. This directly relates to what Hall refers to as “conceptual maps.” Every individual on earth operates with a slightly different “conceptual map,” or background knowledge with which people interpret the world around them. While everyone’s conceptual map is different, those within the same culture will find that theirs share many similarities:

“That is indeed what it means when we say we ‘belong to the same culture.’ Because we interpret the world in roughly similar ways, we are able to build up a shared culture of meanings and thus construct a social world which we inhabit together. That is why ‘culture’ is sometimes defined in terms of ‘shared meanings or conceptual maps’ (see du Gay, Hall et al., 1997)” (Hall 18).

People of a shared culture can most closely relate to each other because of their similar backgrounds. These similar backgrounds are the cause for how a conceptual map is developed, and thus, those with similar backgrounds will share similar maps.

With the understanding of cultural representation categories, we can jump a bit back in time to Hall’s 1973 paper “Encoding and Decoding in the Television Discourse”

and 1980 paper “Encoding/Decoding.” These works highlight his original theory on the encoding/decoding model of understanding television programming and interpretation, and it argues for the concept of an active viewer. The encoding/decoding model stems from the semiotic approach to cultural representation, in that it emphasizes again a relationship between the signifier and the signified. In this case, Hall breaks up television discourse into three components: the encoder, the discourse, and the decoder. The following chart from “Encoding and Decoding in the Television Discourse” provides a visual to the relationship between these three entities:



In this model, the “encoders” are television writers and producers, the “programme as ‘meaningful’ discourse” is what is displayed on the screen, and the “decoders” are the viewers. The encoders select what sort of message or narrative they wish to portray in their work; their conceptual maps heavily influence this. From there, the decoders view the work and interpret it in alignment with their own conceptual maps, and make a conscious decision on what to think of the material. It is also important to note that a relationship exists between the decoders and the encoders, in that in order for

cultural representation and understanding to be ever-changing – and for everyone to be aware – a discussion on difference in conceptual maps must occur. In viewing television as such, Hall argues that its viewers are actively engaged and constantly interpreting (even if they are not aware that this is occurring). This thought challenges traditional ideals that television viewers are passive and not absorbing any cultural narratives; rather, they simply move on with their lives, no differently, when they step away from the TV (or as sometimes called, “idiot box”). Ultimately, when looking at Hall’s encoding/decoding model and theories on representation, one must understand that there is always a message (whether obvious or subtle, conscious or unconscious) that travels through the television discourse.

The beautiful thing about Hall’s encoding/decoding model is that – while it was written in the context of television and media – it can just as easily be applied to just about any other form of communication. In looking specifically at in-person, emotional communication, the conversation can best be turned towards real-life experiences on the topic. Which is exactly where Sacred Heart’s study abroad in India trip comes in. As a member of the January 2019 Sacred Heart University study abroad delegation in Gujarat, India, I was personally able to experience these questions and social issues firsthand. While abroad, not only did I have the opportunity to interact with another culture, but I specifically focused on a class called Working in a Cross-Cultural Context. This course in I-O Psychology allowed my colleagues and I to explore what it means to operate in both business and casual settings in the Indian culture, and also to understand what it means to partake in intercultural communication. In fact, a majority of both the issues and breakthroughs we encountered while abroad took place in a social setting. And when

focusing on the route of these life lessons, it all stemmed from language and our own personal conceptual maps.

Conceptual maps, specifically speaking, were key to understanding each of the roles of SHU and PDPU students in cross-cultural communication. While each student on the trip had at least a slightly different conceptual map, the difference between the maps of the SHU students and the maps of the PDPU students was most apparent. This goes back to what Hall argues: people of the same culture have similar conceptual maps, which therefore makes communicating within one's own culture feel "safer." In order to step out of one's comfort zone and learn how to communicate effectively with people of another culture, it must be understood that mistakes at times can be made. And it is important to both recognize and learn from said mistakes.

While in India, the misunderstandings in communication that my colleagues and I experienced almost always stemmed from an unwillingness to learn about the differences in language and values of actions. While the people we communicated with while in India also spoke English, that did not necessarily mean that we all understood every word to mean the exact same thing. As semiotics teaches us, all language is up for interpretation.

As for social actions, many of our misunderstandings connected – to some extent – to the difference in the value of privacy between America and India. While this may seem like a specific, unimportant idea at first glance, it turns out to be a larger issue than expected. In India, the culture operates in a very community-oriented fashion. People are often close with their neighbors and friendly with the people around them. This, in turn, effects how people live their daily lives in urban centers. Since my colleagues and I

spent most of our time in Ahmedabad, Gujarat, I will use this particular city as my point of reference.

In Ahmedabad, many people leave their doors unlocked and open, and especially in the more crowded parts of town, there is much sharing of space between neighbors and peers. My peers and I, while on a heritage walk through the old city of Ahmedabad, noticed that we were easily able to look into people's houses, witness their worship routines, and watch them perform other daily tasks. We at first felt like we were violating people's privacy with our curious eyes. While we might have been doing so to a certain extent, our tour guide explained that communal living and sharing of space is engrained in Indian culture. Especially since the state of Gujarat is largely associated with its native citizen, Gandhi, there is much trust and respect for nonviolence in the area. People who share space, leave their doors open, etc. trust that those around them will not take advantage.

We were inspired by this, and at the same time a bit shocked at the concept of being so close with the people around us. While the United States has varied and diverse cultures within the nation, we would argue that even the most crowded, urban centers in America would not be so keen on the idea of sharing space. Take New York City for example: many people keep their heads down, lock their doors, and avoid trouble. I personally did not find this difference in the value of privacy to be an issue or something that reflects negatively on either of the cultures. Rather, it is a difference to recognize, learn about, and hope to understand. There are benefits and negatives to both the American and Indian approaches to the concept of privacy. However, while my peers and I were navigating the learning of these differences, we did hit some bumps in the

road. Particularly, we experienced a misunderstanding while visiting a university in the state of Uttar Pradesh towards the end of our trip.

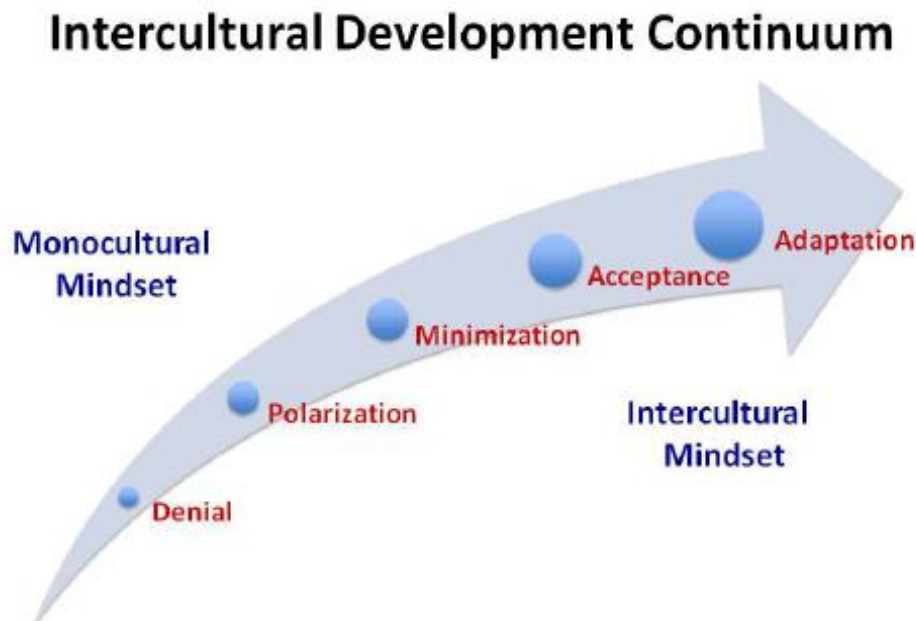
Just when we thought we had mastered the navigation of the India culture (we were far from such mastery though, it turned out), we experienced hurt feelings and frustration with some students at this university. They were not privy to our desire for personal space and informational privacy, which frustrated us. However, in turn and equally problematic, we did not make an effort to communicate our feelings or cultural norms to these students. So instead of talking through our differences, it ended up in a difficult situation where our professors had to get involved.

As embarrassing as it might be to admit that we failed in this instance, it is important to bring up the road blocks that come with a process of finding cultural understanding; there is undoubtedly a learning curve involved here. Making mistakes is one of the most important parts of developing proper intercultural competence, and this scenario allowed us to understand where we went wrong – and more importantly, what we could do next time to get things right.

An important part of our de-briefing upon returning to the United States was to assess our change in cultural understanding through the use of a tool called Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI). The use of IDI allowed us to assess our classroom experiences, personal interactions, and sightseeing visits throughout the trip in terms of our intercultural communication skills. IDI is a survey administered mostly in workplace and training-related settings to assess an individual's cultural understanding (in the context of the work at hand). The goal of the survey, specifically, is threefold. Its purpose is to allow participants to understand their current intercultural challenges,

understand how their Developmental Orientation impacts their cross-cultural exchanges, and identify the means by which they can increase their intercultural competence. IDI also goes on to dispel a common myth: travel is *not* the only means by which a person can increase his or her intercultural competence. In fact, IDI explains that there are 10 means by which this can be done, and travel is not necessarily a shoo-in. If followed through incorrectly, travel can even lead to decreased intercultural competence.

In order to fully get a grasp for what we learned while abroad in India, my colleagues and I were instructed – as part of the class – to take the survey both before and after the trip. As mentioned earlier, the IDI measures a person's Developmental Orientation, or intercultural competence. There is a gradient – called the Intercultural Development Continuum – on which everyone falls; it ranges from monocultural mindset to intercultural mindset. The below graphic is utilized by IDI to represent this gradient:



The Continuum indicates where a person falls in terms of intercultural competence, which IDI defines as “the capability to accurately understand and adapt behavior to cultural difference and commonality.” The five components of the continuum are as follows...

1. Denial is the avoidance of other cultures altogether. Members of the denial category will focus on minute differences between their own culture and the other culture at hand and will avoid cross-cultural communication.
2. Polarization focuses on the difference between “us” and “them.” Polarization is split into two categories: defense and reversal. Members of the defense category will regard their own culture as superior. Members of the reversal category, on the other hand, will regard their own culture as inferior.
3. Minimization involves recognition of universal humanity and all people as equal, but in doing so fails to accept cultural differences. Members of the minimization category are more likely to focus on the similarities between two cultures rather than the differences.
4. Acceptance involves the understanding of differences between cultural groups and works towards navigating these in a positive manner.
5. Adaptation is the mastery of intercultural communications. Members of this category are not only able to recognize and work through cultural differences, but they are also able to place themselves in the shoes of

people of other cultures in an effective manner. This is the goal of anyone who is working with IDI and hoping for intercultural competence.

It is important to understand the five categories of the continuum when completing IDI, as everyone involved is working towards an intercultural mindset. In taking the survey both before and after the study abroad experience, my SHU colleagues and I were able to measure our change in intercultural competence in relation to specific interactions while abroad.

In my personal case, I fell under minimization both before and after the trip. While at first I was discouraged by the lack of measurable growth – as it reveals flaws and room for improvement in my intercultural communications – I was able to determine that my overall experience in India was a positive one in regards of working towards this goal. Professor Gunther of Sacred Heart's Global Health program, who administered the IDI to my peers and I, helped me to work through this topic and its components in a conversation on my results. In doing so, we came to the realization that my lack of measurable growth was, in part, due to the miscommunication that occurred with the students in Agra; as it turns out, the occurrence resonated more with me than I expected it to. And further, this experience affected my view of Indian culture as a whole. Again, as discouraging as this may sound, the discovery of where the problem lies has allowed me to pinpoint the issue and work towards correcting the problem with my intercultural communication.

The difficulty and hard work that comes with gaining an intercultural mindset largely speaks to the seriousness of the issue, and as a participant on the study abroad trip, I am not afraid to admit a lack of perfection. It is no easy thing to become culturally

aware; even traveling across the globe does not guarantee cultural understanding. This ties back to Stuart Hall's work in cultural theory, as his arguments on language and social interaction relate directly to the real-life obstacles one can face when gaining an intercultural mindset. Communication through language, conceptual maps, and social interactions is no easy feat; however, it is the road one must take for beneficial cross-cultural communication.

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